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Insurgencies in Thailand: A Declining Threat

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An Intelligence Assessment

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EA 82-10111C

October 1982

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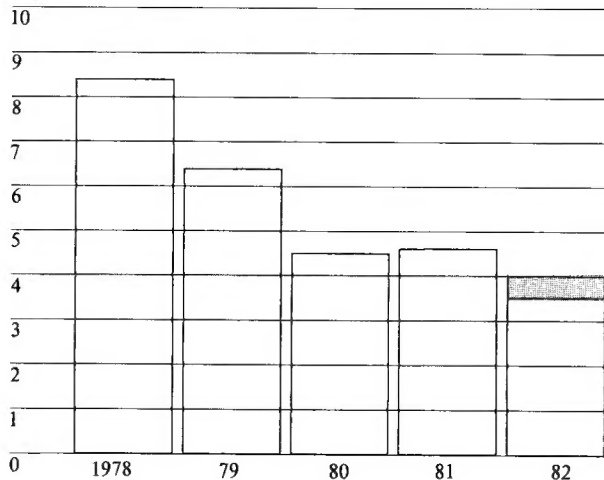
Errata

Notice to recipients of Intelligence Assessment: *Insurgencies in Thailand: A Declining Threat*, EA 82-10111C.

The graphic on page 1 is incorrect. Please replace it with the new chart below.

Thailand: Major Communist Insurgent Incidents^a

Number of incidents



^aMajor incidents cause loss of life, serious injury, or major damage to property.

^bProjected.

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An Intelligence Assessment

This paper was prepared by [redacted]
Southeast Asia Division, Office of East Asian
Analysis. Comments and queries are welcome and
may be addressed to the Chief, Southeast Asia
Division, OEA, [redacted]

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This paper was coordinated with the Directorate of
Operations and the National Intelligence Council, [redacted]

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Key Judgments

*Information available
as of 1 September 1982
was used in this report.*

Thai insurgents are still able to mount raids against government outposts, assassination attempts against local officials, and ambushes in rural areas, but they do not now pose either a serious danger to the stability of the Thai Government or a threat to its control over any major section of the country.

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If anything, we expect the Communist Party of Thailand to become even less effective over the next few years. Operations in the northeast—far and away the most important area of Communist activity since the party's formation—have been sharply curtailed by a cutback in Chinese aid. The government's two-pronged approach to dealing with the party—administrative and economic programs that deny support to the Communists, plus effective military operations—will increase the degree of decline begun by that cutback.

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Other insurgent groups, particularly the Muslim separatists in southern Thailand, will continue to mount sporadic terrorist attacks, but these are even less of a threat to the government. The Muslims' intense resentment toward Bangkok's non-Muslim administration, education, and legal system, however, will hamper Bangkok's efforts to eliminate these groups.

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Several factors could alter our analysis of the threat potential of Thai insurgents:

- A sharp deterioration in economic conditions in Thailand.
- The installation of a repressive regime in Bangkok that pushes large numbers of disaffected Thai into the ranks of the insurgents.
- A large inflow of foreign aid to the insurgents.
- Success by Communist splinter groups in developing ties with a broad cross section of the rural community.

So far we see no indications that these factors will come into play over the next few years. While we believe some level of insurgency is endemic to Thailand, we expect the insurgencies there to remain a containable nuisance.

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Insurgencies in Thailand: A Declining Threat

By all accounts

antigovernment insurgency in Thailand has faded over the past few years from its 1978-79 peak. The Communist Party of Thailand (CPT), which accounts for perhaps 85 percent of Thailand's approximately 8,000 insurgents, is hindered by a sharp reduction in external aid and from internal divisions that have discouraged recruitment and encouraged desertions. The Muslim separatists on the southern peninsula have been unable to draw much active support for their radical causes

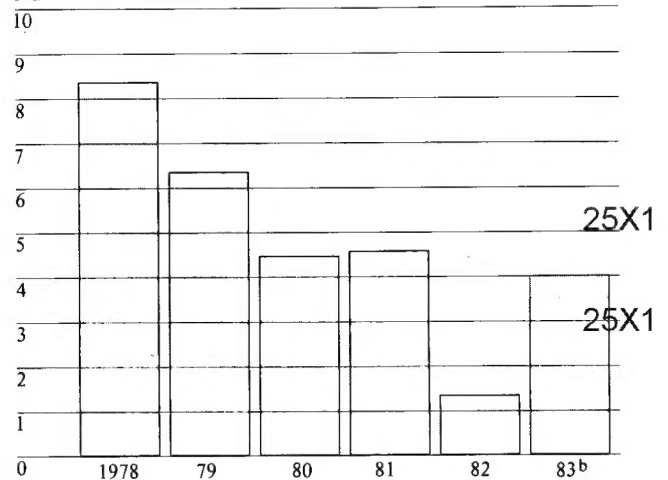
Nevertheless, the government sees the insurgencies as a potential threat and expends significant amounts of money and manpower to keep them under control. According to press reports, Bangkok will spend nearly \$450 million—about one-third of planned annual defense outlays—for anti-Communist operations in 1983. Thailand's military is largely a counterinsurgency force; government casualties resulting from counterinsurgent operations run some 500 annually.

The Communist Party of Thailand

The Communist movement in Thailand began in the 1920s, but no significant military activity occurred until the late 1960s, when the largely ethnic Chinese party leadership began receiving financial support and ideological guidance from Beijing. The party drew support from hill tribes in outlying areas, exploiting government corruption and neglect and reinforcing its message with coercion. The preponderance of the activity took place in the north and northeast because of easy access to Chinese aid; much smaller operations in the south were financed largely by banditry and coercion of local citizens. Before the fall of Saigon in 1975, Bangkok showed little concern over Communist activity in Thailand and did not attempt even to coordinate or sustain counterinsurgency operations. Only after 1975, when Thai officials began to

Thailand: Major Communist Insurgent Incidents^a

Number of incidents



^aMajor incidents cause loss of life, serious injury, or major damage to property.

^bProjected.

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worry about Communist activity throughout Southeast Asia, was any real note taken of the party's potential. A year later a large number of students disaffected with the ultraconservative Thanin Kraiwichien administration joined the party and sparked a surge in antigovernment activity. From a few scattered incidents in the 1960s, in 1978 the CPT initiated more than 800 major incidents.¹ Even at its 1978-79 peak, however,

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the CPT was unable to seriously challenge the government in Bangkok or even to establish a liberated zone in the countryside. [redacted]

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Today it is even less of a problem [redacted]
[redacted] major incidents in 1981 were down by almost half since 1978 [redacted]

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[redacted] We believe the decline [redacted] has three major causes: the reduction in Chinese aid, the inability of the old-line party leadership to attract support from Thailand's young people, and an effective government counterinsurgency campaign. [redacted]

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Declining Support. China's policy of active support for its CPT protege changed with the widening of the Sino-Vietnamese rift in the late 1970s. We believe that after the Vietnamese invasion of Kampuchea in 1978, Beijing became more interested in cultivation of Thai support for the Kampuchean resistance than in backing Thai dissidents. [redacted]

At the same time the party is having trouble holding on to its members, recruitment of new members is lagging. Independent media commentary confirms that progovernment sentiment has been aroused by the presence of Vietnamese troops on Thailand's borders and that the external Communist threat has only heightened the public's distrust of the domestic Communists. Moreover, we believe the influx of refugees from Kampuchea has helped publicize the abysmal living conditions in neighboring Communist states. Finally, descriptions of the insurgents' Spartan existence by defectors have discouraged potential recruits. [redacted]

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[redacted] In 1980 it stopped plain language propaganda broadcasts from the CPT radio station based in southern China. At the same time, Beijing singled out Hanoi as the primary enemy of Communist movements in Southeast Asia. [redacted]

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Beijing's rapprochement with Bangkok has created deep fissures among the lower ranks of the CPT. In 1981, according to press accounts, the CPT offered the Thai Government a nationalist alliance of forces against the common Vietnamese foe, but Bangkok refused. [redacted]

Successful Government Tactics. The government's new political-military offensive—although it has not resulted in heavy insurgent casualties—has further cut into the party's operations and impaired recruitment efforts. Since February, government forces have been penetrating and capturing Communist base areas in the southern provinces formerly considered impregnable, and, according to Thai officials, Bangkok plans to try to secure the region with a protective hamlet campaign bolstered by extensive progovernment proselytizing. In rural areas, Thai officials say that the government is expanding the highly successful psychological warfare approach begun under the Kriangsak administration in the late 1970s in the economically disadvantaged northeast. A recent Bangkok directive indicates that the government now places greater emphasis on political than on military operations. [redacted]

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The four-part program in use today begins with leaflets and broadcasts—not dissimilar to the insurgents' own—to counter Communist propaganda. In the second phase, former CPT members lecture against Communism on the government's behalf. These testimonials, particularly by local defectors, are especially instrumental in swaying the population,

Volunteer Defense Corps are then formed to work alongside the authorities to suppress criminal activities, with emphasis on those of the CPT. Finally, loyal villages are eligible to form Volunteer Defense and Development Corps to provide extended developmental planning and judicial safeguards for the community. In the northeast, the government claims to have created 321 totally secure villages, with a total of 615,000 volunteers in 6,623 villages.

Even more important, the government is adopting a new administrative style. The traditional exploitative and imperious rule by officials insensitive to local needs played into the Communists' hands.

Bangkok has in recent years been sending out better and brighter civilian administrators and military field commanders, particularly to areas with active insurgent groups.

New Splinter Parties

the divisions within the CPT have led to the establishment by CPT defectors of a nominally pro-Soviet party, the Pak Mai (New Party), under Vietnamese tutelage.

the several-hundred-member party, which is headquartered in Laos, is aimed at subverting Thailand's ethnically Lao northeast. In what we believe to be a reference to the new group, Vientiane radio on 3 June heralded the reconsolidation of the "democratic movement" in Thailand following China's "betrayal" of the CPT.

Though founded perhaps as early as 1978, we believe the Pak Mai is still in a formative stage. We believe members are handled by Lao Communists, with whom they share an ethnic bond, but are under the ultimate control of Vietnamese authorities. Armed

Pak Mai groups have made forays into Thailand from their operating bases along the border, primarily to proselytize villagers and reconnoiter.

Muslim Separatists: Non-Communist Nuisance

The activities of up to 1,000 non-Communist Muslim separatists in southern Thailand complicate the security situation. The separatists, who belong to a plethora of small groups—the most notable being the umbrella organization, the Pattani United Liberation Organization (PULO)—want autonomy or union with Malaysia for the southernmost provinces of Thailand. We believe they are not concerned with changing the government in Bangkok, although some might seek destabilization of the regime as a means to attain autonomy. Liaison with the Communists is, we believe, limited at best because of the Muslims' ideological opposition to Communism.

the separatist movement has arisen in response to religious and ethnic discrimination over the years by Thai authorities against the

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2 to 3 million predominantly Muslim, ethnically Malay of the south. Although the separatist groups attract popular sympathy, their limited growth suggests most Thai Muslims have remained on the sidelines. [REDACTED]

Although most of the government's counterinsurgency efforts are directed against the Communists, we see some signs that Bangkok intends to improve its operations against the separatists. [REDACTED]

Bangkok is also applying administrative reforms to southern Muslim districts. Prime Minister Prem, a southerner, increasingly is using local officials for sensitive posts and is trying to reach some accommodation with Muslim desires for such things as Malay language instruction in the schools and a separate legal system based on Islamic law. For example, from 70 to 80 percent of officials in the south today are natives of the region, and about 30 percent are Muslims. According to press accounts, the government also has persuaded a major southern university to offer a four-year Islamic studies curriculum [REDACTED]

A Containable Problem

The insurgents are still able to mount several hundred incidents per year, about the level of the mid-1970s. But the momentum of the insurgency has shifted. Membership has declined and recruitment prospects have worsened. External aid to the Communists has been cut. And the government in Bangkok appears committed to maintaining an active counterinsurgency program. [REDACTED]

There still could be serious, unexpected setbacks to the program—economic crises could shake peasant confidence in the government, for example, or a coup-installed military regime could rekindle the student activist flame. Even more dangerous would be a decision by the government to return to a disinterested style of administration in the traditional areas of insurgent operations. But we see no signs of such major disruptions to Thai society and believe that Bangkok will be able to contain the insurgency for the next few years. [REDACTED]

Implications for the US

Thailand's counterinsurgency program was set up with US assistance but today is largely an internal Thai affair. A major increase in Chinese or Vietnamese involvement with the Thai insurgency would probably lead Bangkok to ask for substantially increased arms deliveries or security guarantees from the United States. But short of this kind of major, and in our view unlikely, reversal, we would expect no more than occasional Thai requests for modest amounts of US aid to the counterinsurgency effort. [REDACTED]

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